The Planned Obsolescence of Language: Miscommunication as a Structural Condition

Peter Ayolov
Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’
2026

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of the planned obsolescence of language as a framework for understanding contemporary linguistic degradation in mass societies. Rather than treating miscommunication as accidental, contingent, or correctable, it argues that modern language systems are structurally oriented toward the loss of semantic durability, stability, and truth-bearing capacity, while remaining highly efficient for power, ideology, and media circulation. Drawing on sociolinguistics, philosophy of language, and media theory, the article shows how speed, novelty, sloganisation, and performative speech erode shared meaning and undermine dialogue. Digital platforms and ideological discourse accelerate this process, producing an environment in which language multiplies while understanding collapses. Miscommunication is thus reframed as the dominant mode of communication under contemporary conditions. The article proposes a unifying theoretical model connecting linguistic form, technological mediation, and social power, offering a structural explanation for phenomena such as propaganda, semantic inflation, and collective stupidity.

Keywords

planned obsolescence of language; miscommunication; sociolinguistics; discourse; ideology; media theory; performative speech; propaganda; semantic degradation; collective stupidity

---

1. Introduction

Contemporary societies are characterised by an unprecedented density of communication. Speech, writing, images, commentary, and symbolic expression circulate continuously across digital networks, institutional channels, and everyday interactions. Public discourse has become permanent, immediate, and global. Yet this quantitative expansion of language coincides with a growing inability to sustain shared meaning, rational disagreement, or stable conceptual frameworks. Political debate fragments into mutually unintelligible narratives, moral concepts dissolve into tribal signals, and public language increasingly produces conflict rather than understanding. This paradox—more communication producing less understanding—is often explained through secondary factors: declining educational standards, media bias, political

polarisation, technological distraction, or the rise of misinformation. While each of these explanations captures partial aspects of the problem, none adequately accounts for its structural persistence across political systems, cultures, and technological platforms. The breakdown of understanding appears not as an anomaly but as a stable condition. This article proposes that miscommunication has become a structural feature of contemporary language itself. It introduces the concept of the *planned obsolescence of language* to describe how linguistic systems in mass societies are organised to produce rapid semantic exhaustion. Words, concepts, and narratives are designed to circulate quickly, mobilise affect, and organise allegiance, while losing durability, precision, and truth-bearing capacity. Language does not fail under these conditions; it functions exactly as required. The notion of planned obsolescence, originally developed to describe industrial production, is here applied to linguistic production. Just as consumer goods are designed to wear out in order to sustain cycles of consumption, modern language is designed to expire in order to sustain cycles of ideological renewal, political mobilisation, and media attention. Miscommunication is therefore not an accidental outcome but a predictable result of linguistic systems optimised for scale, speed, and power.

---

2. Language, Scale, and the Limits of Shared Meaning

Classical theories of language assume relatively bounded speech communities in which shared experience, mutual trust, and slow temporal rhythms allow meaning to stabilise. Even where disagreement exists, participants operate within overlapping conceptual frameworks that make dialogue possible. Sociolinguistics traditionally treats language as a medium through which social relations are negotiated and identities formed, but it often presupposes that language ultimately aims at mutual intelligibility. Mass societies radically alter these conditions. When linguistic communities expand to encompass millions of speakers who do not share lived experience, trust, or interpretive traditions, language must become abstract, flexible, and ambiguous. Concepts are stripped of local specificity in order to function across diverse populations. This abstraction is not inherently pathological; it is a requirement of scale. However, abstraction carries a structural cost. As concepts become more general, they become more vulnerable to ideological appropriation. Their semantic openness allows them to be filled with conflicting meanings without appearing contradictory. Terms such as freedom, democracy, justice, identity, security, or equality function less as referential tools and more as symbolic anchors around which groups organise themselves. Meaning shifts from reference to affiliation. Under these conditions, linguistic disagreement no longer concerns competing interpretations of a shared reality but competing realities themselves. Language ceases to mediate differences and instead produces them. Miscommunication emerges not from misunderstanding but from the absence of a common semantic ground.

3. Planned Obsolescence and Semantic Exhaustion

The concept of planned obsolescence offers a structural explanation for this phenomenon. In industrial systems, planned obsolescence ensures continuous consumption by designing products to wear out or become undesirable. In linguistic systems, planned obsolescence ensures continuous ideological production by designing language to lose meaning through overuse, inflation, and replacement. Semantic exhaustion occurs when words accumulate excessive symbolic, emotional, and ideological weight. Over time, they become unstable and unusable for precise communication. Rather than being clarified, such concepts are abandoned and replaced with new terminology. The replacement does not solve the problem; it restarts the cycle. This process is visible across political, academic, and cultural domains. Concepts initially introduced to name injustice, exclusion, or inequality gradually expand to cover an ever-wider range of phenomena. As their scope widens, their precision declines. Eventually, they become contested, polarising, or meaningless. At that point, new terms are introduced, often with moral urgency, and the cycle begins again. Crucially, this cycle is not merely cultural but institutional. Media systems, political organisations, academic discourses, and digital platforms depend on constant conceptual novelty. Language must continually generate new distinctions, crises, and narratives to sustain attention and legitimacy. Durability becomes a liability.

4. Speed, Novelty, and Temporal Collapse

Semantic durability requires time. Meanings stabilise through repetition, shared interpretation, and gradual sedimentation. Modern communication systems systematically undermine these temporal conditions. Speed becomes a dominant value. Language is produced and consumed in real time, with minimal opportunity for reflection or clarification. Novelty intensifies this effect. Discursive environments reward the new, the urgent, and the provocative. Older concepts are framed as outdated, compromised, or morally suspect. Linguistic continuity is treated as stagnation, while constant reinvention is treated as progress. The result is a collapse of linguistic memory. Concepts do not accumulate historical depth; they burn out. Language loses its capacity to transmit meaning across time, producing a perpetual present in which only immediate affect matters. Without memory, language cannot sustain responsibility or learning.

5. Performative Speech and the Ritualisation of Discourse

A further consequence of planned linguistic obsolescence is the rise of performative speech. In mass-mediated environments, language increasingly functions as a signal of identity, loyalty, or moral positioning

rather than as an instrument of understanding. Statements are evaluated not by their truth or coherence but by their alignment with group norms. Performative speech transforms discourse into ritual. Repetition replaces argument. Deviations are punished not because they are false but because they disrupt symbolic order. Under these conditions, dialogue becomes impossible. To engage genuinely with opposing views risks exclusion, while silence is interpreted as complicity. This transformation explains why contemporary discourse is simultaneously moralised and empty. Moral language circulates intensely but lacks semantic depth. It functions as a badge rather than a bridge. Miscommunication is not a side effect but the structural outcome of ritualised speech.

---

6. Digital Platforms as Accelerators of Linguistic Obsolescence

Digital platforms do not create linguistic obsolescence but dramatically accelerate it. Algorithmic systems privilege engagement, emotional intensity, and repetition. Language that is ambiguous, provocative, or polarising is systematically amplified. Semantic precision is penalised because it travels poorly. In these environments, truth becomes secondary to visibility. Language that generates reaction outperforms language that generates understanding. This creates a feedback loop in which degraded language is rewarded and reproduced, while reflective language is marginalised. Artificial intelligence systems further reinforce this dynamic. By processing language statistically rather than semantically, they normalise surface coherence without depth. While such systems can reproduce linguistic patterns efficiently, they cannot restore semantic durability. Instead, they risk flooding communicative space with fluent but hollow language.

---

7. Miscommunication as a Structural Condition

Traditional communication theory treats miscommunication as deviation from an ideal norm. This article proposes the opposite: under contemporary conditions, miscommunication is the norm. It arises from the normal functioning of language systems designed for scale, speed, and power. Structural miscommunication cannot be resolved through content moderation, fact-checking, or improved literacy alone. These interventions address symptoms rather than causes. The problem lies in the organisation of language itself. This condition produces what can be described as collective stupidity. This is not ignorance or lack of intelligence but a systemic inability to convert information into understanding. Highly educated societies become capable of producing enormous quantities of discourse without generating insight. Language remains instrumentally effective while epistemically hollow.

---

8. Conclusion

The planned obsolescence of language provides a framework for understanding why contemporary societies speak incessantly yet fail to understand one another. Language has not deteriorated accidentally; it has been redesigned. Its degradation is functional within systems of power, ideology, and media circulation. Recognising miscommunication as a structural condition shifts the focus of critique from individual failure to systemic organisation. The question is no longer how to correct speech but how to resist disposability. Without semantic durability, there can be no shared reality. Without shared reality, communication collapses into noise.

When language becomes noise by design, misunderstanding is no longer a failure of communication. It is its intended outcome.

Bibliography

Adorno, T.W. (1974) *The Jargon of Authenticity*. London: Routledge.

Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Carr, N. (2010) *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Chomsky, N. and Herman, E. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent*. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1*. Boston: Beacon Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Postman, N. (1977) *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*. New York: Dell.

Saussure, F. de (1983) *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Duckworth.

Wittgenstein, L. (1961) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge.